

Hadean Lands: The Great Marriage

written by Byron Alexander Campbell | November 25, 2014



Hadean Lands by Andrew Plotkin
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[Zarfhome Software](#) / [iOS App Store](#)

It's a marriage made in the realm of ideal forms. To most of its potential audience, readers and gamers alike, interactive fiction as a form died out at the end of the '80s with the collapse of Infocom. While there are many forms of interactive narrative that persist today, from twines to narrative-heavy graphical games, the term "interactive fiction" in its strictest sense refers to the "go north, take key" parser-driven text adventures that dominated the early home computer scene, games such as *Zork*, *Enchanter* and *A Mind Forever Voyaging*. These notable works, with their preference of intense logic puzzles over twitch gameplay, their use of spare (but sometimes beautiful) prose to set the scene, and their occasional "What do you mean [you can't get ye flask?](#)" interface annoyances, simultaneously reveal the charm and the shackles of the IF form. Given the huge bounds graphical games have made over the intervening decades, even in the indie sphere, a modern gamer might well wonder why anybody would willingly subject themselves to these archaic guess-the-verb nightmares.

For the small but active modern IF community—who tend to pull triple shifts as creators, consumers and critics—there's no question that the form's unique strengths are worth the hassle. A list of the prominent names is revealing: Jon Ingold is a professor of mathematics, while Emily Short is a Classics PhD and Graham Nelson is a mathematician-poet. IF advocates tend to straddle the line between the diamond-hard science of math and the fluffy nimbus of literature. Andrew Plotkin, known also as Zarf, has been an anchor of the indie IF community since the mid-'90s, and his formally challenging works have frequently earned top honors at the annual XYZZY awards. In late 2010, he made headlines for raising a then-staggering \$30,000 on Kickstarter to design his next game, *Hadean Lands*, which he envisioned as the first work of interactive fiction designed specifically for Apple's iPhone (in the four

years it took to develop the game, it lost that distinction). Indie IF has almost always been designed and distributed for free, so Plotkin's crowdfunding campaign was a bold experiment: upon funding successfully, he was able to quit his day job and design interactive fiction as a career.

To make IF work for the iPhone interface, Plotkin envisioned an unprecedented level of sophistication built into the parser (for IF noobs, that's the engine that takes the player's command inputs and spits out an appropriate response). He wanted to make sure iPhone users, with their virtual keyboards and cramped screens, didn't feel like they were at war with the interface, but he also wanted to ensure that it included the richness of response and sandbox feeling that sets IF apart from pick-a-path stories or other, more streamlined interactive narrative forms. That explains the four-year incubation period—while it isn't Plotkin's most groundbreaking work from the perspective of narrative or puzzle design (trumped even by some of his free games released in the intervening years, such as the twine-like [Matter of the Monster](#) and [Bigger Than You Think](#)), *Hadean Lands* is a triumph of technical design.

And he couldn't have chosen a better setting to bring this ungainly, arcane art form into the technological cutting edge. *Hadean Lands* takes place in a parallel universe in which classical European alchemy was never superseded by empirical science, in which concepts such as phlogiston (the invisible element responsible for combustion, oxidation and metabolism) and humorism exist side by side with future tech, for this alchemically advanced society has already entered the space age. Most of the game's action takes place aboard *The Unanswerable Retort*, a "marcher" equipped for travel between cosmic spheres. Of course, it wouldn't be a text adventure if there wasn't a massive problem to solve: seconds into the game, the player character realizes that something's gone terribly wrong with the *Retort*. The rest of the crew is either missing or frozen in fractured, glass-like air, areas of the ship are impossibly corroded or covered in weird gunk, psychically aggressive energy fields choke up hallways, and doors that should connect to corridors instead open onto Hadean lands, "deadly to any breathing life. Unweathered grey rocks and dead dust rest under bright, unwinking stars."

From its first moments, *Hadean Lands* won't let you forget its alchemical nature. The challenge starts gradually, with a small, locked room, a simple-to-perform cleansing ritual to remove tarnish from brass, and a rusted steel hatch. Using the available workbench, the player character follows the precise steps of the ritual, which involve sealing the alchemical bound, waving some aromatic compounds around, and speaking a few alchemical formulae. Exotic as this process seems, the game emphasizes that alchemy is an exact science—perform the steps in the wrong order or contaminate the environment with conflicting influences, and the ritual will most likely fail. What's more, it's an internally consistent process; across the game's trove of rituals, formulae and ingredients, the player always gets the sense that the universe of *Hadean Lands* functions according to reliable universal laws, even if they're not the same laws that govern our own. Case in point: with a bit of lateral thinking and ingredient substitution, the player character can use the brass cleansing ritual to fix the rusted hatch and exit

the room. Then, most likely, he'll step into a void and die.

...which is where Hadean Lands begins to show off its technological prowess. Upon entering the void, the game "resets," and the player character is sent back to the Secondary Alchemy Lab where he first awoke. Everything is back how it was—the bronze calipers are still rusted, the ginger oil's still capped—except both the player *and the character* remember what happened the previous go-round. This isn't just talk. Once you've gone through the process of trying out the brass ritual, making the lateral leap and unrusting the hatch, the game remembers exactly how you did it the first time, and it repeats those steps automatically. Instead of completing the entire ritual, the player can simply type "go down" or "enter hatch," and *Hadean Lands'* parser will spit out something like this:

>down

(first opening the iron panel)

You take the steel bolt.

You take the sprig of rosemary from the side table.

You take the impet of ginger oil from the side table.

You conjure a basic saturation symbol onto the steel bolt.

You lay the steel bolt on the hatch.

You pull the hatch open.

You drop through the hatch into the crawlspace below.

It may not look that impressive now, but the *Retort* is large and twisted, the alchemical rituals and ingredients are many and varied, and *Hadean Lands* is capable of recalling procedures ten times that complex. Later in the game, you can simply type, say, "perform sublime spirit synthesis," and as long as you've done it successfully before, the parser will automatically take you to the right rooms to pick up the necessary ingredients (first performing any *other* rituals necessary to access said rooms), go to the right place, and perform the ritual. A process that may have taken you hours of cumulative puzzle-solving on your first attempt can be repeated in a single command. That isn't science; that's *magic*.

Until it goes wrong. Don't get anxious—this going wrong is, as you'll see, entirely by design. The early game eases the player gradually into the setting. At first, only a small corner of the map is accessible, and early puzzles mostly boil down to learning to follow instructions. By the time the western half of the ship opens up, though, things have become considerably more complex. You'll start to encounter rituals that consume rare resources, *multiple* rituals that consume the *same* rare resource, of which there's only one copy available. You might type "perform sublime spirit synthesis" and find your avatar gets stuck midway through because you already used the you-know-what for that thing over *there*. That's where the reset option becomes a necessity, as you soon discover you can't do everything in the same timeline—and then, by the end of the game, you'll be asked to do it anyway. Hopefully, by then, you've absorbed enough alchemical knowledge to

devise some clever workarounds.

Plotkin's pithy yet complex prose props up an experience that's more about the puzzle design than it is about the plot, although some late-game revelations have prompted a lively speculation thread. In terms of writing style, *Hadean Lands* is similar to [Dual Transform](#) and [Hoist Sail for the Heliopause and Home](#), games Plotkin had just completed when he began the project in late 2010. He makes extensive use of obscure or archaic vocabulary suited to the setting, and deciphering long strings of Latinate syllables is as much a part of the puzzle as figuring out the actions themselves. Even when substitutions or alterations aren't part of your strategy, figuring out the right tools for the job often requires poring over your lengthy list of known facts and formulae. Witness this mid-game ritual:

RIESENZWEIG'S INSCRIPTION, to MIMIC THE AURA OF ANOTHER: This is Riesenzeitig's translation of a Chinese poem (attributed to Yang Wan-Li). The effect is similar to Oehlke's Inscription. Construct a meditative environment based on the Book of Changes. (One should use the central ritual bound of the house, as the symbolism of this tradition always places the five elements in perfect balance.) Place beads of iron and jade within the bound, and speak a simple sealing. Place burning wood upon the gestalt shelf. Invoke the Name of the Tortoise. Discharge elemental air upon the bound. Close with the Chi Binding.

While it can get tedious to type "recall phlogistication" for the dozenth time, this use of language anchors the setting well, establishing a unique blend of sci-fi and arcana. For instance, many faults throughout the ship can be attributed to the malfunction of the four "dragons" that power its systems, each corresponding to one of the four elements in European tradition and each bearing a name that reflects its purpose: Baros manages artificial gravity, while Pneuma oversees pressurization. Again, the key here is consistency—Plotkin's charted a network of symbolic relationships so complete that tinkering and experimenting with the rituals feels natural, yielding multiple solutions to the same problems. While it errs more toward the hard science side of the interactive fiction spectrum, the science on display here is impressive.

If you're new to parser-driven interactive fiction, *Hadean Lands'* advances in usability make it a great introduction, though some of its late-game puzzles will feel a bit like being dumped into the deep end of the swimming pool. (If that makes you nervous, you can also start with Plotkin's [Dreamhold](#), which was designed as an introductory IF adventure and is free to play in browser or iOS.) It doesn't have the experimental bite of some of the award-winning work by Plotkin or his contemporaries, but it's a solid proof of concept that an Inform-style, full-length text adventure can exist, and even impress, in the modern age.